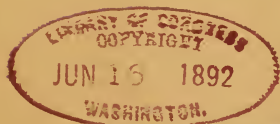


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# SIR WALTER SCOTT.



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## SIR WALTER SCOTT.

**Scott**, SIR WALTER (created a baronet 1819), the greatest of Scottish men of letters, and probably the best beloved author whoever lived, was born in the College Wynd of Edinburgh on August 15, 1771. His father, Walter Scott, was a Writer to the Signet; his mother's maiden name was Anne Rutherford, daughter of Dr John Rutherford, professor of Medicine in the University of Edinburgh. Scott thus sprung from the professional middle classes, but on both sides he came 'of gentle blood.' When he blazoned his quarterings on the roof of the entrance-hall of Abbotsford three shields of the sixteen had to be left blank, through a difficulty about the pedigree of the Rutherfords of Hunthill. Nevertheless, he came of the best blood on the Border, Scotts, Swintons, and Rutherfords. His great-grandfather was the grandson of Auld Wat of Harden, who married the Flower of Yarrow in 1567, and whose son again married Muckle Mou'd Meg of Elibank. The facts of Scott's history are too universally known to be dwelt upon at length. A recent ingenious writer has tried to show that genius is a 'sport' or accidental variety of the consumptive and nervous temperament. It is certain that the first six children of Scott's father and mother died between 1759 and 1766. Locks of their hair, still glossy and golden, lay in Sir Walter's great desk, in his study at Abbotsford. Of the other six children only two, Walter and Thomas, left issue; the present descendants of Sir Walter Scott are the children of the Hon. Mrs Maxwell Scott, daughter of Mrs Hope-Scott, who again was the daughter of

Sir Walter's daughter Sophia, who married Mr John Gibson Lockhart. The mother of Sir Walter survived all her children except the poet and Mr Thomas Scott. Scott himself, though one of the strongest men of his time, with a larger biceps, the Ettrick Shepherd tells us, than any man of the Rough Clan, nearly died in infancy 'in consequence of his first nurse being ill of a consumption.' At eighteen months he was suddenly affected with fever in teething, and lost the power of his right leg. In his third year he was sent to his grandfather's farm at Sandyknowe, where he was taught, not without difficulty, to read, and learned and shouted the ballad of *Hardyknute*. For about a year and a half he was at Bath, then returned to George Square, in Edinburgh, where he astonished Mrs Cockburn (a Rutherford of Fairniee, and author of *The Flowers of the Forest*) by his infant genius. Still lame, he was taken to Prestonpans (aged eight), where he met a veteran named Dalgetty and Mr George Constable, from whom (and from himself) he drew Monkbarons, and heard of Falstaff. Thence he returned, 'a grandam's child,' to George Square, where he lived, always reading and repeating ballads and poetry. In 1779 he was sent to the High School of Edinburgh, where he suffered from the senseless Scottish system of giving 'removes' each year, and from the coteries formed in large classes. He amused the boys with tales; he was ready to fight, 'strapped to a board,' as he was lame; he made game of Burns's friend, the blackguard dominie, Nicol; he fought in bickers with Greenbreeks; he wrote some English verse; he learned some Latin from Dr Adam, the rector or head-master. His schooling was interrupted by a visit to Kelso, where he had the misfortune to become intimate with the Ballantynes. In Edinburgh the blind and venerable Dr Blacklock instructed his poetical taste, and he had his one famous meeting with Burns. He left the High School with a great knowledge of all that he had not been taught, but at Edinburgh University he did not improve his Latin, and, like St Augustine, he declined to learn Greek. His account of the studies of Waverley contains his regrets for wasted time, and his autobiography expresses his grief that he had turned away from Greek, 'considering what that language is, and who they were who employed it in their compositions.' Meantime his lameness was never cured, though he could walk thirty or forty miles in the day. His sweetness of

temper did not suffer, as Byron's did from an infirmity which after all was not so great as to prevent Byron from bowling for Harrow. But Scott had not, like Byron, to feel that, but for this one defect, he would have been a perfect model of beauty. With red hair, an upper lip of unusual length, a brow like a tower, and rugged Border features, he had no temptation, as Byron had, to vanity. Yet a lady has left her evidence that 'young Walter Scott was a comely creature.' About 1785-86 he entered his father's 'office,' the weary 'office' which, like some fabled monster, gapes for the boys of Edinburgh. Here, at least, he learned to cover paper at such a pace as never man did, and in a hand which could put some seven hundred words on one side of a sheet of foolscap. He studied Scots law sedulously, though his long fishing and antiquarian rambles made his excellent father (described in *Redgauntlet*) fear that he would never be better than 'a gangrel scrape-gut.' As a lawyer's clerk, superintending an eviction, he first entered the Highlands, where he already knew Invernahyle, of the '15 and the '45, and many another veteran, whose legends appear in his novels. In Edinburgh he won friendships which only ended with life, and, in the heat of youth, according to his own account, he was at least sufficiently convivial. Of all his friends the world best knows William Clerk of Eldin, the original of Darsie Latimer in *Redgauntlet*. Even now, it seems, the romance of his life had begun, and he loved the lady whom he loved till the end. 'This was the early and innocent affection to which we owe the tenderest pages, not only of *Redgauntlet*, but of the *Lay of the Last Minstrel* and of *Rokeby*. In all of these works the heroine has certain distinctive features, drawn from one and the same haunting dream of his manly adolescence.'

In the autumn of 1796 that dream had gone where dreams go, but it endured where dreams endure, in the heart. On October 12, 1796, one of his friends, who knew the story, wrote, "'Men have died and worms have eaten them, but not for love." I hope sincerely that may be verified on this occasion.' Scott did not die, only his heart, as his *Journal* records, was broken for two years, then 'handsomely pieced,' 'but the crack will remain till my dying day' (*Journal*, December 18, 1825). '*Humana perpassi sumus*,' he adds, in his *Journal*, towards the end of his life. A short poem, *The Violet*, is almost the

only direct allusion to this affair in his works. Not wholly unconnected with his hopes as a lover was his first publication, rhymed versions of ballads by Bürger (October 1796). The poems were admired, but 'proved a dead loss.' The spring of 1797 was spent in yeomanry drill. In July Scott made a tour into Tweeddale, and met David Ritchie, the Black Dwarf. Thence he wandered to Gilsland, where he first saw Miss Charlotte Margaret Carpenter, a lady of French extraction, but of English education. They soon became engaged, and were married at Carlisle on Christmas Eve 1797. Though not a regular beauty, Mrs Scott had large dark eyes, and an engaging air, with plenty of gaiety and sense. Hogg describes her as 'a brunette with raven hair and large dark eyes, but, in my estimation, a perfect beauty.' The marriage, founded on sincere affection, was happy, though some of Scott's friends feared that the successes which left him unharmed might turn the head of Mrs Scott.

Already (1792) Scott had made his first raid into Liddesdale, and every year till 1798 he repeated it, gathered legends, studied characters like Dandie Dinmont, and 'was making himself,' as Shortreed said. His country home was a cottage at Lasswade, agreeably described by Mr R. P. Gillies in his *Recollections*. Scott made M. G. Lewis's acquaintance, wrote for a collection of Lewis's *Glenfinlus* and the *Eve of St John*, and translated Goethe's *Goetz von Berlichingen*. At the end of 1799, after the death of his father, he was appointed sheriff of Selkirkshire. In hunting for ballads he made the acquaintance of Hogg, of Leyden, and of his dear friend and occasional amanuensis, William Laidlaw. In 1800 he suggested to James Ballantyne that he should remove from Kelso to Edinburgh. At the same time he announced that he would give Ballantyne the printing of *The Border Minstrelsy*. The first two volumes appeared in 1802. In the autumn of that year, on Lady Dalkeith's suggestion, he began what he meant for a ballad. It became *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, the first, perhaps the best, of his long poems. It was printed by Ballantyne in Edinburgh. The foundations of Scott's triumph and discomfiture were laid. The *Lay* made him at once the most popular author of the generation, and his share in the Ballantyne printing business proved his ruin. From the moment that he entered as the secret but only moneyed partner into that business he was



never free from financial complications. For these, and all the evil they wrought, it would be unjust to lay all the blame either on the Ballantynes, on Constable, or on Scott. Sir Walter was the last to shirk his own share of the responsibility. Perhaps an accountant can make sense of the controversy, in three pamphlets, between Mr Lockhart and the representatives of the Ballantynes (1838-39). To an ordinary reader it seems clear that Scott hoped to make money by the business of printing, and that he also had 'a kindness like an elder brother's love' for the Ballantynes. It appears quite certain that John Ballantyne, when he entered the firm with no capital, complicated it by his ambition as a publisher, and by a sanguine temper which would not face nor state difficulties. On the other hand, Scott had a century of literary inventions, editions and the like, which were often started to benefit poor working men of letters, but which nearly always failed, except when he himself was the editor. Thus the publishing business was overwhelmed with unsaleable 'stock.' Both Ballantynes were undeniably extravagant. John was recklessly so. Scott himself bought land, always at a price beyond its value, he bought curiosities, his hospitality was more than princely, his generosity was unstinted; he was the providence of poor literary men, and the guardian genius of his neighbourhood. Yet he has been too severely blamed for profusion: Up to 1821 his purchases of land had cost about £30,000, while his official income (as Clerk of Session and Sheriff) had been £1600 a year, 'and he had gained as an author £80,000.' Abbotsford is not 'a wide domain'—far from it—and the house was so far from being a palace that Mr Hope-Scott found it necessary to build a large additional wing thereto. The ruin came not so much from personal extravagance as through business conducted by London connections of Constable's house, in the wildest way, by 'bank accommodation' and bills, eternally renewed. James Ballantyne's own time was much occupied in the correction of Scott's proof-sheets rather than in attention to the details of his commerce. The value of his criticisms has been overestimated: his remarks on the proof-sheets of *Redgauntlet* are inept, and it cannot be said that he was a careful master-printer. Constable's own visionary character added to the complexities, and at last the crash came. Every one was in fault, every one was intoxicated by success. There is no more

reason to doubt the uprightness of James Ballantyne than of Sir Walter, who finally paid his debts with his life. Admirers of Lockhart regret his tone towards the Ballantynes. To him it is clear they had ever been distasteful. He was as fastidious as Scott was almost over-tolerant, and the mere presence of the brothers must have been odious to him. But both had, with all their social defects and commercial demerits, a touching affection for Sir Walter.

We have anticipated the financial tragedy of Scott's life, or rather we have sketched its history from the moment when it began. Scott's prosperity never had a sound commercial basis. He was never really free from anxiety about money. How his sagacity and uprightness endured these bonds is a psychological mystery. In 1804 Scott, as sheriff of Selkirkshire, removed from Lasswade to Ashestiel, a small house beautifully situated on a wooded 'brae' above the Tweed, about four miles from the influx of the Ettrick. Had he been able to purchase Ashestiel, Abbotsford might never have risen from the swamps of 'Clarty Hole.' Early in 1805 the *Lay* was published, and met a deserved success. Scott now busied himself with articles in the *Edinburgh Review*, with his edition of Dryden, and with the commencement of *Waverley*. The early chapters did not please a friend, probably Erskine, and it was not completed till 1813-14. In 1806 Scott was appointed Clerk of Session, and withdrew from the bar. He discharged the duties for some years without the emoluments, which went to his predecessor in the office. In 1806 *Marmion* was begun. The plot is partly based on perfectly fictitious documents, foisted on Scott by Mr Surtees of Mainsforth. He never discovered the fraud. *Marmion* appeared early in 1808. A review, a most quibbling and unfair review, of it was written by Jeffrey for the *Edinburgh*. This attack, and the whiggery of the *Edinburgh*, caused Scott to break off his connection with that serial, and to busy himself in starting the *Quarterly*. Jeffrey did not injure *Marmion*, and its popularity outlived even that of the *Lay*. Scott, who feared to take another 'scouring crop' of verse off the soil, now occupied himself with editing Dryden, Swift, and other classics. He quarrelled with Constable (the publisher of the *Edinburgh*), or rather with his partner, Mr Hunter, and in January 1809 he tells Southey that 'Ballantyne's brother' (John) 'is setting up here as a

bookseller, chiefly for publishing.' Ballantyne was to be in alliance with Mr Murray, but this arrangement did not last, and the publishing business only added to financial complications. In 1810 the *Lady of the Lake* was finished, and over-crowned even Scott's former triumphs. A Highland poem had long been in his mind, alternating with the scheme of a Highland romance in prose. Scott now visited the western isles, and schemed out *The Nameless Glen*, afterwards called *The Lord of the Isles*. He also reconsidered *Waverley*, but seems to have made no progress with it. In 1811 he received at last the salary of his clerkship, and came into a legacy of £5000. Now, too, he bought his first farm, and began to turn the cottage on it into a mansion. The year 1811 saw him busy with *Rokeby*, which proved a comparative failure. *Childe Harold* had appeared; popularity had selected Lord Byron for its new idol. For a wonder, Scott did not rate *Childe Harold* much above its merits, but he entered into a friendly correspondence with Byron. He had never been much galled by *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. In 1813 (after *Rokeby* and the *Bridal of Triermain*) he declined the laureateship in favour of Southey. In 1814 he finished his *Life of Swift*, and published *Waverley*, writing the last two volumes in three weeks. *Waverley* took the world by storm, and Scott, who did not acknowledge the authorship, might well suppose he had found the purse of Fortunatus. The cold reception of *The Lord of the Isles* did not discourage him, and in January 1815, by way of a holiday, he began *Guy Mannering*, 'the work of six weeks at Christmas time.' It was published by Messrs Longman, but, with rare exceptions, Constable, with whom Scott had been reconciled, published the rest of his Waverley cycle. From this point space does not serve to retell the oft-told tale of Scott's amazing fertility. In 1817 a violent illness showed him that even his strength was mortal, but no malady clouds *Rob Roy* or *The Heart of Midlothian*. In 1819 a return of his complaint endangered his life, and in paroxysms of agony he dictated *The Bride of Lammermoor*, which, when printed, he read as the work of a stranger. He did not remember a line of it. His health was in part re-established; he opened a new vein of gold in *Ivanhoe*, but failed to please his readers with *The Monastery*.

If it is na weel bobbit  
We'll bob it again,

he said. Novels poured from his pen, society flocked to Abbotsford, he seemed to Miss Edgeworth 'the idlest man alive.' Yet he never neglected his official duties; he toiled like a woodsman in his plantations, and he entertained all comers. As he said of Byron, 'his foot was ever in the arena, his shield hung always in the lists.' He managed the king's reception in Edinburgh, he heard cases at Selkirk, he took part in raising volunteer corps, he conducted an enormous and distracting correspondence, he cared for the poor with a wise beneficence, he had a great share in starting the Edinburgh Academy, he presided at the councils of the new gas company, he began the *Life of Bonaparte*, and still the novels flowed on. In 1825 he commenced his *Journal*, and for all that followed the immortal pages of that sad and splendid record must be consulted. *Woodstock* was in hand when the commercial crash came. Scott bore it like a stoic. From that hour all the energy not needed for public duties went into literature. He sometimes toiled for fourteen hours a day, led on by the hope of paying every penny of his debts. His labour cleared them, though not in his lifetime. Before his wearied eyes and worn brain the mirage of his complete success used to float at intervals, and who could grudge him these dreams through the ivory gate! It is needless to repeat the tale of his last days, his desolation when his publisher, Mr Cadell, disapproved of *Count Robert of Paris*, the insults heaped on him by the Edinburgh radical mob, his last voyage, his continued work at *The Siege of Malta*, his return home, his death. Few out of all who have read Lockhart or the *Journal* can have studied these chapters with tearless eyes. It is said that on the last morning of his life consciousness returned. He asked his nurse to help him to the window; he gave one last look on Tweed and said, 'To-night I shall know all.' That night he was 'Heaven's latest, not least welcome guest,' September 21, 1832.

In a brief record of his life it is impossible duly to estimate Scott, as an author or as a man. The greatness of his heart, the loyal affection and kindness of his nature, are at least as remarkable as his astonishing genius. There is only one voice as to his goodness. He was the most generous, the most friendly, the most honourable of men. In no relation of life did he fall short of the highest excellence. The magnetism (as we may call it for want of a better word) of his personality endeared

him not only to mankind, but to the lower animals. Dogs, cats, and horses took to him at once. He was even persecuted by the affection of grotesque friends, pigs and chickens. He is one of the few who retain, after death, this power of making us love those 'whom we have not seen.' Nor was he less sagacious, in all affairs but his own, than he was sympathetic. As a man of letters he was more than generous, far from being envious, he could hardly even be critical, and he admired contemporaries in whom the judgment of posterity has seen little to approve. In his lifetime the Whigs, as Whigs, did not love him. He was a Tory. With a sympathy for the poor, which showed itself not only in his works, but in all his deeds, and in all his daily life, he believed in subordination. All history showed him that equality had never existed, except in the lowest savagery; and he could not believe in a sudden reversal of experience. His tastes as a poet also attached him to the antique world. His ideal was, perhaps, a feudalism in which every order and every man should be constant to duty. Absentee landlords he condemned as much as callous capitalists. He had seen the French Revolution, he had witnessed various abortive 'risings' in the west country, and his later years were saddened by apprehension of a *Jacquerie*. He hated the mob as much as he loved the people, his own people, the kindly Scots. He was a sturdy Scotchman; but, says Lockhart, 'I believe that had any anti-English faction, civil or religious, sprung up in his own time in Scotland, he would have done more than any other living man could have hoped to do to put it down.'

As a writer it is a truism to say that, since Shakespeare, whom he resembled in many ways, there has never been a genius so human and so creative, so rich in humour, sympathy, poetry, so fertile in the production of new and real characters, as the genius of Sir Walter Scott. To think of the *Waverley* novels is to think of a world of friends, like the crowd whose faces rise on us at the name of Shakespeare. To say this is to say enough, but it must be added that scenes as well as people, events as well as characters, are summoned up by his magic wand. There is only one Shakespeare, however, and he possessed, what Scott lacked, every splendour and every glory of style. Of both men it might be said that 'they never blotted a line;' but the metal flowed from the furnace of Shakespeare's brain into many a mould of form, all

magical and immortal in their beauty. Scott 'never learned grammar,' as he said, and his style is that of an improviser. Its recklessness, and occasional flatness, he knew as well as any of his critics. But again and again, in published work, as in unpublished letters, he owns himself to be incapable of correcting, and impatient of the labour of the file. In proofs he corrected freely, but seldom to improve the style. It is often lax, and even commonplace; it rarely approaches distinction. It is at its best, absolutely perfect indeed, in his Scotch dialogue. Nor was he more careful of his plots. In the introduction to the *Fortunes of Nigel* he shows us exactly how he worked, incapable of laying down the lines of a plot, and sticking to them, following always where fancy led him, after Dugald Dalgetty, or Bailie Nicol Jarvie. Delay, painstaking, would not have made *him* a more finished writer, and would have deprived us of many a Waverley novel. Every man must do his work as he may: speed was Scott's way. The only real drawback to his unapproached excellence, then, is this congenital habit of haste, this quickness of spirit, which, as Lady Louisa Stuart said, made him weary of his characters long before his readers were weary. Yet his genius triumphs in his own despite, and what he wrote for the amusement of a generation is fashioned for immortality, living with the fiery and generous life of his own heroic heart. Scott's poetry suffers more from his 'hasty glance and random rhyme' than his prose, because from poetry more exquisite finish is expected. That finish is only to be found in his lyrics, the freshest, most musical, most natural and spirited of English verses. In his metrical romances he has spirit, speed, ringing cadences, all the magic of romance, all the grace of chivalry. Since Homer no man has written so much in Homer's mood, so largely, so bravely, with such delight in battle. But 'the grand style' is absent, save in the more inspired passages. Scott's lays are lighted with the Border sun, now veiled in mists, now broken with clouds: we are not here in the wide and luminous ether of Homer and of Hellas.

Wild as cloud, as stream, as gale,  
Flow forth, flow unrestrained, my tale!

he exclaims, in lines addressed to Erskine, conscious of his fault, but impenitent. His fame must suffer in some degree from his own wilfulness, or, rather, from the incurable defect of a genius which was



rich, but not rare; abundant, but seldom fine. It may suffice for one man to have come nearer than any other mortal to Shakespeare in his fiction, and nearer than any other mortal to Homer in his verse. His influence on literature was immense. The Romantic movement in France owed nearly as much to him as to Shakespeare. Alexander Dumas is his literary foster-child, and his only true successor. To him also is due the beginning of a better appreciation of all ancient popular antiquities, and a more human understanding of history.

The best source for information about Scott's life is, necessarily, Lockhart's biography. The best edition is the second, in ten volumes (1839). The *Journal*, in its complete form, may be procured either in one volume or in two volumes (1890). The *Ballantyne Humbug* and the *Refutation* may be studied, by people who must study them, in various editions of 1838-39. There is much interesting matter in Mr R. P. Gillies' *Recollections of Sir Walter Scott* (1837), and some amusing anecdotes in Hogg's *Domestic Manners and Private Life of Sir Walter Scott* (1834), though the Shepherd is a garrulous and graceless witness. Mr Carruthers' *Abbotsford Notanda* contains a few facts worth noting, and so does the Catalogue of the Centenary Exhibition. The Catalogue of the Abbotsford Library is a valuable index to his studies, and there are letters of some importance in *Archibald Constable and his Literary Correspondents* (1873). In 1872 Mr Hope-Scott published a reprint of Lockhart's condensed version of the Life, with a prefatory letter to Mr Gladstone. An interesting parallel between Homer and Scott is in Jebb's *Introduction to Homer* (1887).

Scott's works, especially the novels, have been translated into almost every civilised tongue, and he has had imitators in all languages. There are several French translations, of varying merit. In German the best are those associated with the names of Hermann (new ed. 1876) and Tschischwitz (1876); the Life by Elze (1864) is notable. See also the articles in this work on Abbotsford, Dryburgh, Ballantyne, Laidlaw, Lockhart, Hope-Scott, Ballad, and Novels.











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